

What to Make of National Guard Tankers?

Strong unit cohesion is a given...they've been together for years

by First Lieutenant Jim Sosnicky

When I left the Regular Army under the Voluntary Early Release and Retirement Program (VERRP) in 1995, I was required to complete my active duty service obligation (ADSO) in the Army National Guard.

My image of the National Guard had not been a good one. Kent State. Overweight slobs guzzling beer on the gunnery range. Draft dodgers who joined the Guard in the late Sixties and early Seventies to avoid service in Vietnam. Plus, how could a tank battalion be run on a part-time basis? While I had been assigned to 1-34 AR and 2-34 AR at Fort Riley, I'd observed that tanking was a full-time... correction... an over-time job. A company commander in 2-34 AR who had served in the Guard while going through ROTC in college told me that it was "a nice club to be in, but not much else." "Sir, I heard you're joining the Nasty Girl," a mortarman from HHC remarked as I was about to ETS. "God help ya."

So it was with much trepidation that I reported for duty as the executive officer of C/1-104 Cav, Pennsylvania Army National Guard, at Fort Indiantown Gap. A year later, due to a civilian job change, I reported for duty as the XO of yet another Guard unit, D/1-101 Cav, New York Army National Guard, in Newburgh, N.Y. I am still serving in this capacity.

I have been in the Guard for a few years now and have participated in enough weekend drills, annual training rotations, and disaster relief efforts to draw some conclusions about the quality of the citizen-soldier and the effectiveness of an Army National Guard armor unit.

Personnel

The first stereotype that I found to be untrue was the overwhelming presence of fat, beer-guzzling draft-dodgers. Never once have I seen or heard about alcohol being consumed in the field. The overwhelming majority of soldiers in the Guard units I have observed have prior active duty experience. Unlike the Vietnam-era Guardsman who may have

joined to get out of going to war, many present-day Guardsmen are veterans of Operation Desert Storm. These are men who joined the Guard after their time on active duty because they wanted to maintain ties with the military, not men who joined the Guard to avoid combat. The difference is a fundamental one, and goes a long way toward explaining the professionalism of the modern Army National Guard. The majority of company grade officers in 1-101 Cav have prior active duty experience. Four of these young officers are graduates of West Point. Three of these West Pointers — the CO, the XO, and the third platoon leader, are in Delta Company. (Yes, I meant to say company. For some strange reason of lineage that I don't understand, our cavalry squadron has companies, not troops.) For the rest of this article, I will focus on Delta Company, as this is the unit about which I have the most intimate knowledge.

Ninety percent of Delta Company's members are former active duty soldiers. Fourteen are former active duty Marines. Former Marines are not unique to my unit. They pepper the duty rosters of many an ARNG unit. The frequent deployment of the Marine Reserve is a big reason that several of these few good men cross over to the Army. Another is the absence of a Marine combat unit nearby. Guys who were Marine infantrymen are now ARNG tankers. The Marines' loss is the Army's gain. Every Marine brings with him a duty-first, Semper Paratus mentality that is quite comforting and inspiring to be around. The presence of 14 former Marines in our company stiffens our backbone quite a bit and adds tremendously to our professionalism.

About 75 percent of Delta Company is employed by the highway patrol, the state correctional system, and several municipal police and fire departments. Again, this is not rare. It has been my observation, while serving in two units and talking to soldiers from many more, that many active duty soldiers who ETS trade in their battle dress uniform for the uniform of a civil servant. They go from one disciplined environment to another. They

leave one chain of command to enter another. The result is that these men never lose the "military mindset," which in turn adds to the professionalism of the unit. This mindset rubs off on those of us who do not work in civil service.

Whatever the civilian occupation, when a soldier leaves active duty he doesn't go into a vacuum. He gets a job, he buys a dog, he gets older, he finds a wife, he has some kids, he continues his civilian education, he often advances into management positions at work. All of these combine to make him a more mature, more intelligent, more able-to-take charge soldier. A sergeant who, in civilian life, has to manage a family and a mortgage and an office and his evening master's degree program is at least as mature and responsible as his active-duty counterpart.

Unit Cohesion

The men of Delta Company have served together for several years. One of the things that bothered me about an active duty armor unit — no matter what reasoned explanation I was given — was that you spend a year building a team through platoon and company lanes, gunnery cycles, countless hours in simulators, combined arms live fire exercises (CALFEX), and finally with a rotation at the NTC. And then, when you're finally all working together like a machine, PCSes and ETSes bust you all up, and you have to start building a team all over again. In the Army National Guard, promotion is slow and movement outside of one's battalion is limited. The positive result of this is that men spend more time working together, building tighter crews, platoons, and companies. A sense of heritage and tradition that develops only with shared time and shared events does indeed flourish in the National Guard. And while promotions are slow, the STAP program (Select Train Assign Promote) ensures that upward mobility does indeed happen.

One out of four weekends each month, a fourth of a Guard soldier's free time, is spent with his unit. Over half of our drills this year required us to take a Friday off of work, making a weekend drill actually

three days long. The Guardsman spends two weeks out of the year at an active duty post with his unit. And, in the case of Delta Company, the governor, at least once a year, mobilized us to do disaster relief, whether it was after a tornado in upstate New York or when a hurricane struck the lower Hudson Valley. Adding all of these together, and including weekly training meetings, a National Guard lieutenant or sergeant can expect to spend 100 days each year wearing a uniform. Most active duty folks don't realize that. Nor do they stop to think that this is all done on a person's free time.

Something else to consider: At Fort Riley, a quarter to a third of our time was devoted to post details and routine services. While it's true that a Guardsman spends more time out of uniform than he does in, it is also true that active duty tankers don't spend every day on a tank.

Solid Training in the Fundamentals

Each year, Delta Company tankers complete common task training (CTT), the tank crew gunnery skills test (TCGST), countless hours in the mobile conduct of fire trainer (MCOFT), and then either two weeks of gunnery at Fort Drum or two weeks of simulated maneuver training at Fort Knox.

This year, we will conduct one week of gunnery at Drum and one week of SIMNET at Knox. Our relative proximity to Fort Drum allows us to run through the preliminary tank tables during regular drill weekends. This past annual training (AT), we conducted a live-fire of the new Tank Table VIII at Fort Drum with observers from the 3rd ID making sure we trained to standard. Eleven of our fourteen crews qualified Q1, while the other three were Q2. When it comes to individual tank crew gunnery, we can hang with anybody; active or reserve. As far as platoon-level gunnery, we will be conducting a Tank Table XII for the first time this year.

As far as maneuver training, company-level SIMNET exercises are always a success. In terms of command and control, Delta Company is solid. What is untested, however, is our ability to maneuver over long distances on real tanks, in the dark and cold and rain, with malfunctioning radios and thrown tracks. A real weakness to be sure, but one that would be the primary focus of a 30- or 60-day train-up at the NTC prior to combat. It is also a challenge faced by the

active duty, whose field time has been limited due to budget constraints. As the active component relies more and more on simulators and expends fewer rounds during fewer gunnery cycles, the gap between active and reserve narrows. Much coverage was given to the poor performance of National Guard tank units at the NTC during the time of Desert Shield/Desert Storm. As strange as it seems, that was nearly 10 years ago. Many of those soldiers were of the old Guard, pre-STAP, pre-drawdown ilk. The majority of company-level officers and men of today's Guard have been on active duty, and many served honorably with active duty units during the Gulf War.)

A quick note on equipment. Most Guard units train on M1 tanks. While not as hi-speed as its younger brothers, this tank serves its purpose when it comes to keeping current with maintenance procedures and gunnery skills.

Can National Guard drivers drive a tank? Yes. Can the loaders load, the gunners gun, and the TCs command? Yes, yes, and yes. Do they work well together as a crew? As a platoon? Yes and yes. Do they have a basic understanding of maneuver tactics based on past active duty experience and continuous SIMNET training? Yes. Would more maneuver time on real tanks be helpful? Of course.

Active Duty Support

Delta Company conducts most of its training at Fort Drum, Fort Knox, or Fort Dix. Because we are only a few hours by bus from Fort Drum and Fort Dix, we can go to both places often. Being a couple miles away from Stewart Air National Guard Base in Newburgh, we fly down to Fort Knox during two or three regular drill weekends each year to use the SIMNET and COFT facilities there. The full-time staff at all of these installations — whether they be active duty, active guard/reserve (AGR), or federal technicians — are always professional, and they enthusiastically assist us in accomplishing our training objectives. Without them, and without the full-time skeleton crew organic to our company and HHC, we could not accomplish our missions.

The full-timers at home station do the basic maintenance, logistics, and administrative duties necessary to keep our company going. Weekly training meetings with all key part-time personnel are also essential. The telephone and e-mail

are the two big tools National Guard leaders rely on to keep a handle on things during the time between drills.

Support from active duty personnel also comes from the folks in the schoolhouse and in the virtual schoolhouse. On-site courses at Camp Smith, Fort Dix, and Fort Knox keep Delta Company tankers abreast of current doctrine. And with the Army's distance learning program, NCOs can complete Phase I of BNCOC and ANCOC (to name two), while officers can complete BMOC in total, Phase I of the Advanced Course (now, the Armor Captains Career Course), and certain phases of subsequent, more advanced, military education. Distance learning is a wonderful thing and the men and women who put it together and maintain the various programs should know that their efforts are appreciated by citizen soldiers in every state.

Use of Army National Guard Tankers in Real-World Missions

Army National Guard tankers train to standard on individual, crew-level, and platoon-level tasks. A National Guard tank platoon can hold its own against any platoon on active duty. Companies, because they are normally spread apart from each other across the state, enjoy great camaraderie and *esprit d'corps*. Prior active duty experience, continued military education, and over 100 days of training together each year make these companies a valuable addition to any larger team. With minimal preparation — 30 to 60 days of continuous field exercises — Delta Company would be fully deployable for combat. In terms of battalion-level deployments, I am too junior to make that assessment. Personally, I would feel better being deployed with my entire battalion for no other reason than it would be comforting to know a lieutenant colonel from the 1-101 Cav would have a say in how and where Delta Company fought as part of a brigade combat team.

This ain't your father's National Guard. It is a professional, well-functioning, war-fighting organization. For those on active duty who might be assigned to work with a citizen-soldier tank unit, rest assured that you and they will profit greatly from the experience.

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